

## Historical Threads

# **Some Local Dominguez-Escalante Memorials Fading with Time**

by Jay M. Jones

On October 11, 1776, while Americans were fighting the British at the Battle of Valcour Island on Lake Champlain during the American Revolution, a small group of Spanish explorers were settling their differences by casting lots in the desert about 25 miles northwest of what is now Cedar City, Utah.

The Dominguez-Escalante Expedition left Santa Fe, New Mexico in late July of 1776, seeking an overland route to the Spanish Mission in Monterey, California which had been established in 1770.

Led by Father Francisco Atanasio Dominguez, the group consisted of around a dozen men on horseback, plus additional pack animals bearing supplies. A few Native Americans accompanied the party at times along the way, serving as guides.

They pursued a northerly route into Colorado and then turned westward. The terrain in what is now Utah was totally unknown to them.

The padres avoided a more direct route from Santa Fe to Monterey because they knew an overwhelming obstacle – the Grand Canyon – blocked the way. A more southerly route was not pursued because of extreme deserts and hostile Natives.

Father Silvestre Velez de Escalante kept a detailed journal of the expedition. Because of his journal, his name is memorialized in the Escalante Valley in Iron County, as well as a river, a town, and a national monument in neighboring counties.

Traveling southwest from Utah Lake and nearing what is now Iron County, Fathers Dominguez and Escalante realized that their chances of arriving safely in California that season were slim and diminishing.

Problems mounted. They encountered a snowstorm near Milford, making travel difficult. Supplies ran low. A Native American guide abandoned them and went home to Utah Valley. Realizing that problems would escalate as time went on, Dominguez and Escalante made the decision to return to Santa Fe.

The expedition cartographer Bernardo Miera did not agree with the decision to abandon their original goal of reaching California. Several others agreed with Miera.

With dissent reaching a critical level, the group stopped at what is now called Dominguez Dome or Dominguez Knoll, a small hill in northern Iron County between Horse Hollow and Blue Knoll. Here Father Dominguez reiterated the seriousness of their situation.

According to Escalante's account, "He gave them a brief exhortation, for them to subject themselves entirely to God's will and, by laying aside every sort of passion, beg Him with firm hope and lively faith to make it known to us."

The group then cast lots to arrive at a final decision, trusting that God would guide the outcome. The result was to return to Santa Fe, a choice that almost certainly saved their lives.

An informational sign at the Dominguez Dome site commemorates the Casting of the Lots event. The road to the site is primitive. Boy Scouts placed markers along the way in 1975 in preparation for the expedition bicentennial. Some of these markers have deteriorated and fallen due to weather.

A roadside historical site commemorating the Casting of the Lots event is located off Highway 56 west of Cedar City (approximately 4500 W Hwy 56), but there is not a sign on the highway alerting passing motorists that it's there.

In 1930 a stone monument with a plaque commemorating the expedition was placed at the Hotel El Escalante, located at 200 North and Main Street in Cedar City. The plaque was designed by Christian Petersen, a noted American sculptor. The hotel was demolished in 1970 and the monument was moved across the street to the city park. Several years ago it was removed from the park and is currently not accessible for public viewing.

On October 12, 1776 the expedition camped near present day Kanarraville. A sign near the southbound I-15 rest area west of Kanarraville reads "Historical Site", but additional information at or near the rest area explaining the historical significance could not be found.

Not all memorials of the Dominguez-Escalante expedition are fading away. Earlier this year, a statue recognizing Father Escalante was among five statues placed at the Iron Springs Resort honoring local stalwarts and icons.

The Dominguez-Escalante expedition set a tone for peaceful cooperation between Natives and Europeans. It played an important part in the history of the American Southwest, and the part of that history that took place in Iron County deserves to be remembered.

**Photos related to remembering the Dominguez-Escalante expedition in Iron County. Photos by Jay Jones, except for the Hotel El Escalante photo from SUU Special Collections. (Filename) in parenthesis.**



(DD1) Informational sign at the Casting of the Lots site at Dominguez Dome northwest of Cedar City.



(DD2) Another view of the informational sign at Dominguez Dome.



(H56-1) Dominguez-Escalante marker off Highway 56 west of Cedar City



(H56-2) Close-up of information on Dominguez-Escalante marker off Highway 56.



(Horse\_Hollow\_1) Trail marker along the Dominguez-Escalante route near Horse Hollow.



(Horse\_Hollow\_2) Fallen trail marker on the road near Horse Hollow.



Escalante monument designed by Christian Petersen in 1930, formerly in Cedar City Main Street Park.



(152) Statue of Father Escalante located at Iron Springs Resort west of Cedar City.



Hotel El Escalante, built in the 1920s to support the tourist trade to the National Parks, highlighted the contributions of the Dominguez-Escalante expedition to the history of the Southwest. SUU Special Collections Photo.



Along the Dominguez-Escalante trail near Blue Knoll